There can be substantial differences between managers’ and customers’ perspectives on new self-service technologies.

For many companies, the idea of self-service technology seems like a win-win proposition. Kiosks, websites, mobile apps, and other self-service technologies now let service businesses streamline transaction processes, reduce overhead, and potentially increase revenue - all while giving the customer more control over the service process. In reality, however, there are numerous examples of self-service technologies that have not delivered expected business benefits. For example, the Albertsons LLC grocery store chain, based in Boise, Idaho, decided to remove self-checkout kiosks from its stores in an effort to enhance customers’ overall shopping experience.

Are customers shying away from self-service? No. In fact, customers often prefer self-service to employee-led options. For instance, rental car brands such as Alamo and Enterprise report that self-service kiosks can reduce check-in times by half, leading to greater customer satisfaction with the rental process. Consumers are not running away from self-service options-just poorly implemented ones. Poorly implemented self-service technologies result in frustrated customers or customers who ignore them, as well as unrealized revenue and cost savings for businesses.

This raises the question: Do managers really understand what customers want in a self-service offering? From a manager’s perspective, a new self-service medium can create excitement and give tech-savvy customers more options in a desired experience. But managers may not have a good grasp of what customers require in a self-service technology.

To examine whether differences exist between managers’ perceptions of what customers want in a self-service experience and what customers actually want, we surveyed two groups about what they thought customers wanted in a self-service experience: restaurant managers who recently implemented a self-service ordering technology that lets patrons place their own food orders, and customers who used that technology. We found stark contrasts in three areas: customers’ need for employee interaction, convenience of the self-service technology, and desire for speed in the transaction.

1. **Need for Employee Interaction**: Self-service technologies are often implemented with the expectation that customers want to use them and will happily explore them. In reality, however, many customers are hesitant to use a new self-service technology, especially if it departs from the existing script of how the service is supposed to progress. Managers significantly underestimated the need for employee interaction during a self-service experience, especially when customers were exhibiting technology anxiety. Customers want a safety net in case a failure occurs, we found, and they explicitly want an employee to be available.
2. **Convenience:** The second area that showed glaring contrasts between managers and customers was the importance each group placed on convenience. A primary reason that customers choose self-service is the belief that it will provide more convenience - which often means the customer chooses how and when the interaction takes place. Customers noted that the convenience of a self-service technology significantly affected the accuracy of a transaction; managers, on the other hand, rated the influence of convenience as significantly less important to accuracy.

3. **Transaction Speed:** The third area where managers and customers differed was the importance of speed in the transaction. Speed of transaction had the strongest influence on satisfaction for customers, while managers rated it significantly less important. Many self-service success stories focus on making a utilitarian task faster. An emphasis on transaction speed also means that store layout, appropriate spacing, and placement are important for avoiding bottlenecks.

In general, the differences between what customers want and what managers think customers want in a self-service experience were enlightening. Managers saw little need for employee assistance, underestimated the importance of convenience, and ultimately undervalued the speed of transaction. These three areas have a tremendous impact on the implementation of a self-service technology and might explain why some self-service applications have received a lukewarm reception.

As managers try to find new ways to give customers options while focusing on cost-cutting, self-service applications can be an attractive alternative - if you understand what customers want. However, companies that focus more on cost-cutting measures than on customers’ experience may find that self-service technologies produce no more than disenchanted customers and a sunk-cost technology that nobody wants to use.